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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire with demographic questions and questions concerning learning disability (LD) assessment and placement practices was developed and sent to all 341 practicing school psychologists in Minnesota. Focus was on determining: the school psychologist's role in the assessment and reevaluation of students referred for LD placement, the criteria and procedures currently used for LD placement, and school psychologists' recommendations for criteria and procedures for LD placement. A return rate of 67% (228 practitioners) was obtained. A total of 216 questionnaires from 103 males and 113 females were included in the data analysis. The average respondent served 148 individual students last year, conducted 34 initial LD evaluations and 22 reevaluations, and reported direct data-gathering responsibilities in 74% of initial evaluations and 65% of reevaluations. Ability-achievement discrepancy criteria were used for placement according to 90% of the respondents and were recommended for future use by 56% of those answering the question (a plurality of 46% of respondents). The effect of prereferral interventions was mixed. Implications for the evaluation of students referred for LD placement and roles for the school psychologist are addressed. Five tables present the study data. (Author/SLD)

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The LD Assessment Process:

A Survey of Minnesota School Psychologists

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Abstract

A survey of all 341 Minnesota school psychologists was undertaken in order to determine the role of the school psychologist in the assessment and re-evaluation of students referred for LD placement, the criteria and procedures being used for LD placement, and to solicit school psychologists' recommendations for criteria and procedures for LD placement. A return rate of 67% was obtained. The "average" respondent served 148 individual students last year, conducted 34 initial LD evaluations and 22 re-evaluations, reported direct data-gathering responsibilities in 74% of the cases involving initial LD evaluations and 65% of re-evaluations. Ability-achievement discrepancy criteria were utilized for placement according to 90% of the respondents and were recommended for future use by a 56% of those answering the question (a plurality of 46% of the respondents). The effect of pre-referral interventions was mixed. Implications for the evaluation of students referred for learning disabilities placement and roles for the school psychologist are addressed.

The role of the school psychologist in identifying students with learning disabilities is, perhaps, as controversial as defining learning disabilities. While surveys of school psychologists (e.g. Smith, 1984, 1988) continue to show more time devoted to assessment, especially LD assessment; than other activities, much dissatisfaction with this role remains. At the same time there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes learning disabilities and how to identify them. Although the use of discrepancy procedures is fraught with difficulties (e.g. Lyon, 1987; Willson, 1987; Mastropieri, 1987), a recent survey of state departments of education indicated that 71% (36 states) utilized discrepancy criteria for identifying students with learning disabilities (Fronzaglio, 1990). Curriculum based approaches are also advocated for LD identification.

From the perspective of the individual school psychologist, there are a number of unanswered questions. How should l ning disabilities be defined? What is the role of the school psychologist in this process? What assessment procedures should be utilized?

Purpose of the Study

Therefore, the purposes of the present study were: (1) to determine the role of the school psychologist in the assessment and re-evaluation of students referred for possible LD placement; (2) to determine the criteria and procedures being used for LD placement; and (3) to solicit school psychologists' recommendations for criteria and procedures for LD placement.

Procedure

A questionnaire including demographic questions as well as questions on learning disabilities practices was developed and sent to all 341 practicing school psychologists in Minnesota. Questionnaires were returned from 228 practitioners for a return rate of 67%. Of these questionnaires, 216 were included in the data analysis. (Questionnaires that were not completed or from practitioners not involved in direct service delivery to students were excluded from data analysis). The final sample consisted of 103 males (48%) and 113 females (52%) with an average of 11.5 years of school psychology experience.

Results and Discussion

The "composite" or "typical" school psychologist in Minnesota is most likely employed in a suburban setting and is supervised by an individual with a special education background, has a Master's degree plus 30 semester/45 quarter credits, was trained in school psychology and is a member of both NASP and the Minnesota School Psychologists Association. Average age is 41 years with 11 years of school psychology experience and no teaching experience. These results are presented in greater detail in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

On average each school psychologist served 148 individual students last year (104 special education students and 43 regular education

students). The majority of time was spent at the elementary school level and was devoted to assessment followed by consultation and paperwork. Their involvement with the LD identification/programming process was extensive and diverse. Respondents indicated that on average they evaluate 34 students for possible learning disabilities placement each year and conduct 22 re-evaluations. These activities consumed 25% and 14% of their time, respectively. In addition, they reported they had direct data-gathering responsibilities in 74% of the cases involving initial evaluation of learning disabilities placement and 65% of re-evaluations. These results are presented in greater detail in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

Although LD criteria varied from district to district, the majority of respondents reported the use of an ability/achievement discrepancy, which is consistent with the majority of other states (Fronzaglio, 1990). The magnitude of discrepancy ranged from one to two standard deviations with most respondents reporting the use of a one and one-half or two standard deviation criterion.

A number of different LD criteria were suggested. The ability/ achievement discrepancy model with a 22 point standard score difference between measures was recommended by the most number of respondents (99 or 56% of those answering the question and a plurality of 46% of the total sample). Curriculum based approaches were recommended by 14

respondents while another 13 recommended their use in combination with a discrepancy model. Many respondents expressed uncertainty over the criteria while others supported noncategorical approaches.

Only 87 of 216 respondents (40%) commented on suggested procedures for establishing LD eligibility. Procedures ranged from use of curriculum based measures to use of ability and achievement tests to a combination of these approaches. Although a consensus on procedures was not evident as a majority of respondents did not offer an opinion, more respondents recommended use of ability and achievement tests than any other approach.

A greater number of initial assessments for possible learning disabilities placement were indicated at the elementary level with more re-evaluations at the high school level. Placement criteria were described as more stringent at the high school level as compared to the elementary level. Assessment instruments also varied as a function of the student's age.

The effect of pre-referral interventions was mixed. A decrease in the number of students referred for possible learning disabilities placement was reported by 66% of the sample. At the same time, 49% of the sample reported no change in the number of students placed in learning disabilities programs while 47% reported a decrease. The number of "inappropriate" referrals decreased according to 73% of the sample. An increase in school psychologists' involvement in regular education was reported along with no change in the level of special education involvement. Respondent comments were both positive and negative toward pre-referral interventions. Frequently cited problems

included: increased paperwork, the process as a "road block" to services and anger/frustration on the part of classroom teachers. These results are presented in greater detail in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Respondents indicated that adaptive behavior played little or no role in LD assessment. Furthermore, the majority of respondents did not believe adaptive behavior should be a major factor in the assessment of LD. A lack of consensus in defining the basic construct itself was noted.

Most respondents did not indicate differences in initial LD evaluations or re-evaluations by grade level groupings (elementary, middle school/junior high, senior high). For those reporting differences, most attention was focused on different tests at different age levels (as a result of students ages) and more initial evaluations at the elementary level.

A majority of school psychologists reported being involved in LD conferences and writing the IEP for initial placements. For re-evaluations, however, the majority indicated they did not participate in these activities.

Respondents were unanimous in reporting that re-evaluations are conducted every three years or less. Ability and achievement testing was utilized in 87% and 97%, respectively, of cases on average.

Overall, the respondents indicated specialized training in a number of areas. More than 75% of the sample had completed graduate level courses in these areas: child development, adolescent development, statistics/research design, learning theory, behavior modification, consultation, counseling, psychoeducational interventions, intellectual assessment, and academic assessment. Less training was noted in reading instruction and regular education curriculum/methods in which 58% and 48% of the sample, respectively, had completed graduate level courses with 23% and 28% of the sample, respectively, having no formal training in these areas. These results are presented in greater detail in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

Conclusions

1. School psychologists are heavily involved in the LD identification process with the average school psychologist in Minnesota devoting almost 40% of his/her time to initial LD assessments and re-evaluations.

2. Respondent comments were affected or influenced by a number of underlying themes including the role of professional judgement in placement decisions; whether special education or regular education is best for students; controversy over the existence of LD; magnitude of the discrepancy to be used in discrepancy models; and the role of state agencies in providing criteria and cut-off scores.

3. Although more school psychologists who recommended LD criteria and procedures supported an ability/achievement discrepancy model (99 respondents or 56% of those answering the question and 46% of the total sample), support for such a model is not universal.

4. There is a disagreement among practitioners as to whether or not LD really exists, and if it does, how it should be defined.

5. There is concern among practitioners that the use of an ability/achievement model to establish LD criteria may lead to constriction of the school psychologist's role to one that is primarily assessment in nature. Today's school psychologists have received broad-based, specialized training which allows them to offer unique services not provided by other school personnel. There is concern that the LD criteria and procedures that are adopted could result in a constriction of the school psychologist's role.

6. The establishment of LD criteria and procedures is also influenced by the continuing debate over the relative value of norm-based testing and curriculum based approaches. Although many school psychologists recognize the value and contributions of both approaches and suggest their use as needed in individual cases, other school psychologists are strong advocates for one approach or the other. From the comments of the respondents, it appears that one s views on this issue are strongly related to one's position on LD criteria and procedures.

7. The role professional judgement should play in placement decisions is of major concern to many practitioners. Numerous respondents indicated that the role of professional judgement in

selection of assessment procedures and placement decisions should be incorporated into LD eligibility criteria.

8. Who should establish LD eligibility criteria -- state agencies or individual school districts or individual child study teams -- is of concern to many practitioners. Numerous respondents to the questionnaire raised this issue and no consensus of opinion was indicated. An analysis of respondent comments indicated that many respondents strongly believed that criteria for LD placement, measures or approaches to be used in the assessment process, and determination of any cut-off scores that might be utilized should be a decision made by the individual child study team or individual school district. While guidelines might be promulgated at the district or state level, the ultimate placement decision should be made by the individual child study team without fear of funding for programs being affected by the decisions the team makes.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Sample

Teaching Experience:	51 yes	165 no			
Location of Employment:	52 urban	50 rural	113 suburban		
Sex:	103 male	113 female			
Degree:	7 Master's	117 Master's + 30 sem/45qtr			
	41 Specialist	12 ABD	37 Doctorate		
Professional Membership:	112 NASP	140 MSPA			
Field of Graduate Study:	183 School Psychology	11 Clinical Psychology			
	5 Spec. Ed.	16 Reg. Ed.			
Training of Immediate Supervisor:	65 School Psychology	11 Clinical Psychology			
	101 Spec. Ed.	22 Reg. Ed.			

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range
School Psychology Exper. (yrs)	11.50	7.22	1- 32
School Psychologist:Student Ratio	1901.01	988.33	25-5000
Students served per year	147.62	82.56	5- 470
Special Education	103.97	59.90	1- 325
Regular Education	43.23	44.38	0- 267
Initial LD Assessments per year	33.91	30.67	0- 150
LD Re-evaluations per year	22.22	20.49	0- 130
Direct, data-gathering responsibilities (% of cases)			
Initial evaluations	74.00	39.08	0- 100
Re-evaluations	64.78	41.34	0- 100

Table 2

Distribution of School Psychologists' Time

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
By Setting				
Preschool	214	11.25	22.82	0-100
Elementary	214	48.03	35.87	0-100
Junior High	215	13.46	21.28	0-100
Middle School	215	7.30	17.00	0-100
Senior High	215	18.07	25.76	0-100
By Activity				
Assessment	211	32.21	16.44	0- 81
Consultation	211	18.46	11.18	0- 80
Intervention	211	13.90	12.37	0- 84
Paperwork (reports, etc.)	211	14.48	9.54	0- 80
Child Study Meetings	211	9.90	6.32	0- 37
Developing/Presenting Inservice Programs	211	2.08	3.16	0- 30
Research/Program Evaluation	210	2.44	7.56	0- 80
Continuing Education/ Professional Development	209	2.81	3.50	0- 40
Travel	207	1.69	2.70	0- 15

Table 3

Self-perceived Competency Ratings for Professional Activities

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Assessment	209	6.37	0.77	4-7
Consultation	209	5.83	1.05	2-7
Intervention	201	5.50	1.10	2-7
Paperwork (reports, etc.)	206	5.45	1.20	1-7
Child Study Meetings	201	6.01	1.04	1-7
Developing/Presenting Inservice Programs	155	5.04	1.51	1-7
Research/Program Evaluation	139	4.38	1.94	1-7

Note. Competency ratings range from 1 (low) to 7 (high)

Table 4

Effects of Pre-referral Interventions

	Increase	Decrease	No change
Number of "LD" referrals	7 (4%)	112 (66%)	51 (30%)
Number of "LD" placements	7 (4%)	80 (47%)	84 (49%)
Number of "inappropriate" referrals	8 (5%)	124 (73%	38 (22%)
School psychologists' responsibilities			
in special education	49 (29%)	29 (17%)	91 (54%)
in regular education	93 (55%)	12 (7%)	64 (38%)

Table 5

Areas of Professional Training

	N	Courses		Workshops	None
		Undergrad	Graduate		
Child Development	207	138 (67%)	190 (92%)	92 (44%)	3 (1%)
Adolescent Development	207	97 (47%)	158 (76%)	84 (41%)	13 (6%)
Statistics/Research Design	207	113 (55%)	196 (95%)	18 (9%)	4 (2%)
Learning Theory	207	109 (53%)	185 (89%)	36 (17%)	6 (3%)
Reading Instruction	206	36 (17%)	120 (58%)	54 (26%)	48 (23%)
Regular Education Curriculum/Methods	207	57 (28%)	99 (48%)	50 (24%)	58 (28%)
Special Education Curriculum/Methods	207	37 (18%)	142 (69%)	75 (36%)	32 (15%)
Behavior Modification	205	80 (39%)	183 (89%)	120 (59%)	5 (2%)
Consultation	207	11 (5%)	161 (78%)	131 (63%)	10 (5%)
Counseling	205	42 (20%)	179 (87%)	124 (60%)	6 (3%)
Psychoeducational Interventions	207	15 (7%)	181 (87%)	143 (69%)	8 (4%)
Preschool Assessment	206	4 (2%)	140 (68%)	134 (65%)	22 (11%)
Intellectual Assessment	207	17 (8%)	201 (97%)	126 (61%)	2 (1%)
Academic Assessment	207	16 (8%)	187 (90%)	103 (50%)	9 (4%)

Note. Percentages for each area total more than 100% as respondents could check more than one category.